



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine

Volume 17
Issue 4 *Winter 2008-2009*

Article 7

2008

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Recommended Citation

Benner '09, Amelia (2008) "Argus alumni turn back the news pages at reunion," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*: Vol. 17: Iss. 4, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol17/iss4/7>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Argus alumni turn back the news pages at reunion

Story by AMELIA BENNER
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Former staff members Sarah (Zeller) Julian '07, Becky Welzenbach '07, Jim Dorsey '68 and George Vinyard '71 enjoy swapping tales of their editorial travails at the Argus reunion.

reunion, held during Homecoming weekend. Organized by Karin McDowell '00, the October reunion allowed *Argus* alumni — whose graduation dates ranged from the early 1950s to 2008 — to share memories and explore the *Argus* office on the Memorial Center's second floor.

"It was really great to see alumni from throughout the years being united through their experiences at the *Argus*," said Sarah (Zeller) Julian '07, a former editor. "The event was a way for some of us younger alums to find out more about what the campus was like during national conflicts like the Vietnam War, but also to share our common experiences — late nights designing the paper, conflicts with administrators and a desire to learn what journalism is all about."

Many former staff members were surprised that the room was no longer partitioned into separate offices and is now filled with computers instead of typewriters. But the beloved boar's head above the fireplace — the unofficial *Argus* mascot that mysteriously appeared in the office during the 1980s — was a familiar sight for many and a popular backdrop for photos.

The *Argus* Homecoming issue, published on Oct. 3, also included a special supplement with guest columns by past editors. The issue's front-page headlines reflected the issues of the day — the stock market crisis and the impending presidential election — as well as campus events and opinions. Several reunion attendees praised current staffers for their willingness to connect with what's going on beyond the campus bubble.

Former *Argus* editor Jim Dorsey '68 will never forget the road trip he and five fellow student journalists took during spring break 1966.

En route to Florida in a car with valve problems, the group spied a banner promoting a Ku Klux Klan rally near Montgomery, Ala. The budding reporters decided to attend and then report what they observed in the paper, which has been students' source for campus news since 1894.

"We had grannies in their sheets, and babies in their sheets — and six preppies from Illinois," Dorsey recalled with a laugh. During the rally, one Klan leader told the crowd, "I want you all to look around and point out the FBI informants." The Wesleyan students cowered.

Dorsey recounted the story at the first-ever *Argus* staff reunion, held during Homecoming weekend. Organized by Karin McDowell '00, the October reunion allowed *Argus* alumni — whose graduation dates ranged from the early 1950s to 2008 — to share memories and explore the *Argus* office on the Memorial Center's second floor.



Alumni recalled Harvey Beutner (shown standing in above photo) as a guiding voice for the *Argus* newsroom.

Thomas Wetzel '72 shared his memories of one of the most turbulent periods in Wesleyan history with current editor Julie Regenbogen '10. Not long after taking the editorial reins in the spring of 1970, he and his staff tackled their first major story: the shootings at Kent State University on May 4, 1970, in which students, some protesting the American invasion of Cambodia, were killed by members of the Ohio National Guard.

“There was a real fear that there were going to be demonstrations — even violent ones — right here,” Wetzel said. Instead of cribbing their coverage from the national wire services, an *Argus* reporter called Ohio and stayed on the line for four hours to get first-hand accounts of the shootings. The paper published an expanded edition that week, covering both the events at Kent State and the reaction on campus.



Chris (Calvert) Zippe '02 (with baby Muireann), Angela Nelden '03 and Brian Duffy '03 peruse bound volumes of past issues in the *Argus*'s eclectically decorated office space.

Wetzel hoped for a slow news week following that issue, but then, while working in the *Argus* office past midnight on May 12, he heard someone yell “Fire!” Soon fire trucks surrounded Presser Hall, home to Illinois Wesleyan’s School of Music. “The image that I remember is music students sitting on the curbs, absolutely in tears,” Wetzel said. When it was learned that arson caused the fire, which damaged the Presser stage and several practice rooms, many assumed there was a connection to war protesters — though two juveniles later confessed to setting the blaze.

Wetzel’s own “trial by fire” as a new editor wasn’t over yet. That spring was marked by student protests, cancelled classes, and an appeal to cancel that June’s commencement as letters to the editor poured into the *Argus* office.

“And that,” Wetzel said with a laugh, “was my introduction as *Argus* editor.”

Unlike *Argus* staffs of later decades, “our crusades had nothing to do with society,” said George Allison '51, who spoke at the reunion and also penned a column for the *Argus* Homecoming issue. “They had to do with things like dancing and having Coke on the second floor of the Memorial Center.” At the more-conservative Wesleyan of the 1950s, students couldn’t even drink soda — let alone the glasses of wine served at the *Argus* reunion — upstairs in the Memorial Center. Allison and his colleagues wanted to change that.

Under Allison’s leadership, the *Argus* hired a big band and “had a really marvelous dance,” he remembered. “We filled this place, and I think we even made money because we sold so darn many tickets.”

And that, Allison said, was “how we got Coke onto the second floor of the Memorial Center.”

Several former staffers expressed fond memories of Bernie Gummerman, who printed the newspaper for many years, and longtime *Argus* advisor and Professor of English Harvey Beutner, who died in 2003. Remembering Beutner, Wetzel paused, overcome by memories. “His love for us and ours for him,” he said, “transcended” the advisor–advisee relationship.

Jim Plath, who chairs the English Department and is the current *Argus* advisor, also shared his memories of the legendary journalism instructor, adding that Beutner was a “tough act to follow.”

“Working with journalists is kind of like being a parent,” said Plath, now in his 20th year as *Argus* advisor. “It ages you prematurely and it keeps you young.”